

ROAR OF THE WIND

The first winter ascent of Makalu.

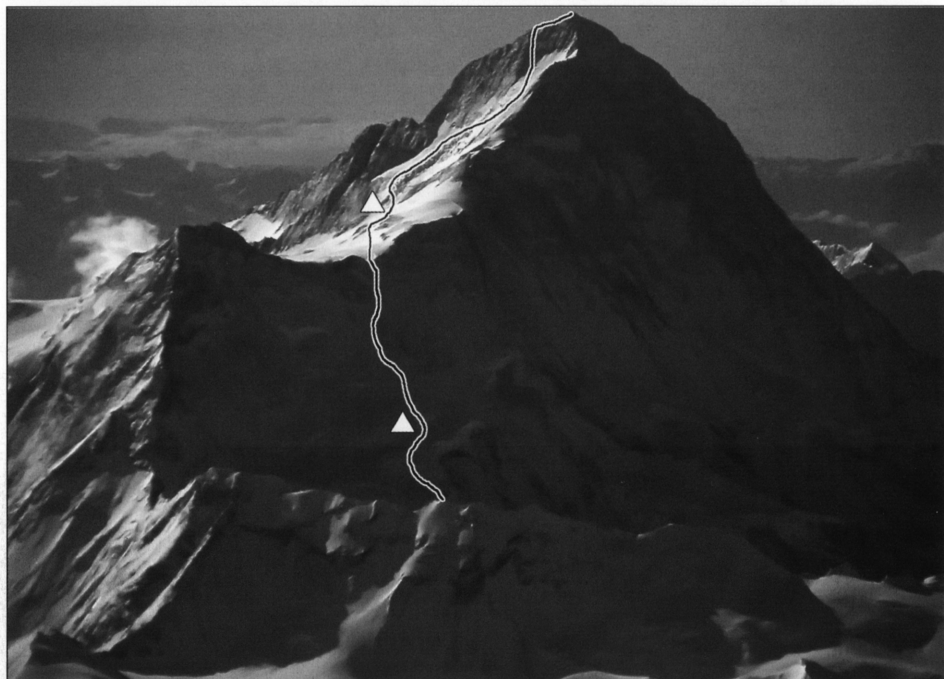
SIMONE MORO



Simone Moro at ca 8,000m on the northwest ridge of Makalu. Behind him is the east ridge of Lhotse Shar, with Lhotse Main immediately behind it. At right: Mt. Everest from the southeast. *Denis Urubko*

My latest expedition would have been special regardless of the objective. It was my 40th trip outside Europe, and, as when I turned 40 a year earlier, it marked an inevitable point of reflection. I started high-altitude mountaineering in 1992 on Mt. Everest, where I contracted cerebral edema at 7,400 meters due to rushed acclimatization. This year, the milestone of my 40th expedition culminated 1,000 meters higher (and at -40°C) on the summit of Makalu.

But this wasn't the only anniversary I celebrated on Makalu. This was the 10th year of my friendship with Denis Urubko, a friendship and partnership born in the Tien Shan and Pamir during the "speed" Snow Leopard program—attempting the five peaks over 7,000 meters in the



The upper northwest ridge route on Makalu. Moro and Urubko camped at 6,900m and at 7,650m. They placed their high camp 250m above the broad col of Makalu La for a shorter summit day. *Simone Moro*

former Soviet Union in quick succession. Denis climbed them all in only 42 days; I stopped after four summits in 38 days.

Makalu in winter was our seventh expedition together, and it had the potential to be a milestone for Himalayan climbing, since Makalu, after 13 winter expeditions in 29 years, was the only Nepalese 8,000er that still remained unclimbed in the cold season. It had been attempted by many of the best alpinists, starting in December 1980 (the year of the first winter ascent of any 8,000er, Mt. Everest) with the trio of Renato Casarotto, Mario Curnis, and Romolo Notaris. In the following years Makalu was attempted by a British expedition, Ivan Girardini (solo), Andrzej Machnik and his Polish team, Reinhold Messner and Hans Kammerlander, Krzysztof Wielicki (twice), a Spanish expedition, Jean-Christophe Lafaille (solo, tragically), and, most recently (in 2008), Denis Urubko and Serguey Samoïlov, along with Nives Meroi and her husband, Romano Benet. Makalu just didn't want to be climbed in winter!

This year the mountain would have passed the winter undisturbed, had it not been for our Polish friends on Broad Peak. I had attempted this 8,047-meter peak in Pakistan the previous two winters. (I'd already climbed the mountain in the summer of 2003 in 29 hours.) In early March 2008, I turned back tantalizingly close to the top, at 7,840 meters. I decided not to go on because it was already 2 p.m., and I had no intention of killing myself by proceeding beyond the time limit dictated by good sense. (Consider what happened in 2008 with the accidents on K2....) It had been a painful but necessary decision to turn back, and it probably saved my life, but I still had a burning desire to finish the match, and I was ready, therefore, for a third attempt on Broad Peak in the winter of 2009. However, I did not want to tackle the mountain with a big team.



Urubko battles the omnipresent wind while climbing steep snow and ice toward Makalu La at 7,400m. The two men clipped into abandoned fixed ropes where they found them, but climbed most of the route without their aid.
Simone Moro

The presence of Artur Hajzer's Polish-Canadian expedition forced me to make a choice. I could accept their kind offer to join their group, or I could choose another objective with Denis. I chose the second option—more costly and inconvenient, but more in line with my preferred style of climbing. Denis immediately accepted my invitation to attempt Makalu, thanks to our friendship and his views, similar to my own, on the appropriate style for high-altitude climbing, as well as his own wish to settle the score with Makalu.

Very quickly, we decided on a different strategy and style of ascent from most previous winter attempts on 8,000-meter peaks. To begin with, we acclimatized in the Khumbu region, so as not to see Makalu and thus become obsessed with or nauseated by the mountain, as often happens when you have to wait for weeks, if not months, for good weather at base camp. Our acclimatization was very relaxing, with good weather. We pushed ourselves twice toward 5,600 meters and stayed for a few hours at our high points.

In the meantime our caravan of porters proceeded slowly toward Makalu, hindered by the deep powder snow that had accumulated in the narrow Arun valleys, until the dramatic news reached us that they could make no further progress. We had to interrupt our acclimatization and quickly return to Kathmandu, where we arranged to hire the only Russian helicopter available and fly to the village of Tashigaon, to which the porters had retreated. In two trips we transported everything to Hillary base camp at 4,900 meters. This little game cost us nearly \$20,000.

The weather on Makalu was good, but the cold was fierce, made even worse by the wind.



Moro traverses the last few meters to the summit of Makalu. Kangchenjunga is the high point on the horizon in upper right. *Denis Urubko*

We did another acclimatization hike to 5,800 meters near base camp, and then, making the most of the clear skies, we went directly to advanced base camp at 5,650 meters, under the west face of Makalu, with only a tiny tent, a little stove, and food sufficient for a few days. After a night at ABC, we continued the following day toward Camp 1 at 6,100 meters, and the next day to Camp 2 at about 6,900 meters. The following morning we pushed on to 7,050 meters and then descended all the way to advanced base camp. In the meantime, our cook, assistant cook, and three porters, all of whom had flown with us to base camp, had moved up to join us at ABC.

Although we had climbed beyond Camp 2, we did not leave any tents set up on the route. This was our second key tactical decision. We feared the wind might blow away any camp we established, and so we planned to repitch our tent at each bivy site every time we moved up the mountain. The wind was our constant companion on Makalu. At night it roared continuously, like tens of aircraft taking off.

Once advanced base camp was set up, we made another reconnaissance, climbing to 7,350 meters. Just below Makalu La, we were almost knocked over by the wind. Now we reckoned we were ready to try for the summit. We just had to wait for a summit-day forecast with winds less than 100 km/hour, and then we'd race to the top. The starting signal would come from Austrian Karl Gabl, who we were phoning for weather bulletins. For years, Karl has been the only person I've trusted for weather forecasts, and Denis trusts me. Our trust was put to the test on February 6, when our observations of local conditions tempted us to begin our summit



Moro takes his turn on the summit: 1:53 p.m., February 9. *Denis Urubko*

push. But Karl insisted the wind would be too strong, and I decided to avoid this risk by waiting one day and accepting another risk—that the forecast would be wrong! In the end, this third tactical decision paid off.

On February 7, with a forecast for three days of wind between 70 and 90 km/h we climbed to Camp 1 in 1 hour 9 minutes, and then proceeded to Camp 2 in another 2 hours 20 minutes. Here, we spent an hour digging out a tent and stove that we had buried in a snow hole. We pitched the tent and passed the night there. At 7 a.m. on February 8, we set off in the shade and very strong winds, climbing the technical ice gully to Makalu La, and then continuing up to 7,650 meters. We set up camp there and waited out the afternoon and first few hours of the night. The cold was nearly insupportable, and the wind seemed ready to rip

away the tent, even though we had tied it down as well as we could.

The alarm sounded at 3 a.m. on February 9. We slowly crawled out of our sleeping bags and started to prepare breakfast and our equipment for the summit bid. All of our movements were very slow and deliberate, but we were able to joke, a good sign. At 6 a.m. we were outside the tents, and we moved as quickly as possible as we removed our gloves to put on crampons and tie into our 25 meters of 7mm rope. It was still dark, with a strong wind. We climbed toward the big seracs that we had identified the previous afternoon as landmarks for the pre-dawn hours, and then moved around them and headed toward the snow and rock gullies that lead to the summit crest. We climbed steadily, occasionally exchanging a few words.

We were going really well, but the higher we climbed the more violent the wind became. After reaching the end of the snow gully at 8,200 meters and then entering the mixed ice and rock gully, the climb became a true battle against gusts of wind and the cold. In addition to the problems of altitude and the accumulated fatigue of the preceding three days of self-supported climbing, we were still in the shadow of Makalu's north basin. Then, on the summit ridge, we were totally exposed to the wind, which gusted that day as high as 100 km/h. Always roped together, we stopped to belay many times in the mixed gully and along the ridge, being very careful not to make a mistake or lose our balance in the gusts.

At 1:53 p.m. I climbed onto the summit—the last of the Nepalese 8,000ers had now been climbed in winter. I climbed down and Denis took his turn on the sharp summit triangle, bracing himself against the gusts. Twenty-four hours later we were back in base camp, leaving nothing behind that we had carried up the mountain.

For the record, at certain points on the route we found old fixed ropes of varying diameters and in various condition; we dug out and retied some of these ropes, and used them during the ascent and descent, mostly below Makalu La. We also found a fixed rope in the last 30 meters of the climb, leading to within five meters of the summit, and we clipped into it for extra safety, but we never hung from the rope because it was partially damaged. Honestly, any help we received from those few meters of fixed rope was like a drop of water in an ocean. By strict definition, we did not climb Makalu alpine style, but we did climb it fast, light, and clean.

Only 19 days after our arrival at base camp, the expedition had finished with the best possible result. After 29 years of attempts, Denis and I had closed an important chapter in the history of climbing, and we wish to pay tribute to those who preceded us in this dream. We have only finished what others started. Obviously, I am proud of having made the summit during the only two first winter ascents of 8,000ers since 1988: Shishapangma in 2005 and Makalu in 2009. Both times, I was on top with a single companion. Only two months after our climb on Makalu, Piotr Morawski, my partner on Shisha, died in a crevasse on Dhaulagiri, on April 8, 2009, and once again I found myself on my knees. I have lost too many friends in the Himalaya. I will, however, continue to attempt to fulfill my dreams—many of which were shared with friends who are now lost. If alpinism is the conquest of the useless, giving up would render useless the greatest of adventures: life.

SUMMARY:

AREA: Mahalangur Himal, Nepal

ASCENT: First winter ascent of Makalu (8,485m) by Simone Moro (Italy) and Denis Urubko (Kazakhstan). The two men climbed the northwest ridge after acclimatization trips as high as 7,350m. Starting from advanced base camp on February 7, they bivouacked at 6,900m and 7,650m before reaching the summit on February 9, 2009.

A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Simone Moro was born in 1967 and lives in Bergamo, Italy, with his wife and daughter. He began his professional climbing career in the mid-1980s. In the summer of 2008, Moro completed the first ascent of Beka Brakai Chhok (6,940m) in Pakistan, with Hervé Barmasse, an ascent reported in the Climbs and Expeditions section of this Journal.

Translated from the Italian by Peter Herold, who operates the Lemon House (www.peteranne.it), a guesthouse for climbers in eastern Sardinia.



Simone Moro (left) and Denis Urubko trying to stay warm at 6,900m during the ascent. Denis Urubko